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FOREIGN AFFAIRS | Flora Lewis

Politics of Terror

As Jordan edges warily toward talking to Israel with Palestinian participation and Egyptian support, murky forces are doing what they can to prevent it. This was to be expected. Conflict serves many in the Middle East.

The importance of the fighting in southern Lebanon is not only local. The Shiites who are attacking Israeli forces and being subjected to Israel's "iron fist" in retaliation have introduced a crucial new factor in complex Middle East politics.

They enable radical Arabs to boast that armed uprising is possible, to escalate their campaign against "traitors" who would deal with Israel, and perhaps most important, to heighten the pressure of fear on vacillating conservative Arabs who might otherwise give Jordan a little passive support.

This applies particularly to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. The U.S. has regularly exaggerated the role these weak reeds can play in advancing American diplomacy.

Israel helps its worst enemies by provoking and prolonging hatred in

Is Abu Nidal dead or alive?

Lebanon. The violence accompanying its wise decision to withdraw won't assure future calm there, and will leave a greater menace to Galilee.

The killing of two CBS television technicians was a grave mistake that only exacerbates the situation at a time of great delicacy. Eyewitnesses from other Western media said it appeared to be deliberate. Prime Minister Shimon Peres should not have tried to justify the fatal shots as an accident of war. He should at least appoint a commission of inquiry.

The danger, as ever in the Middle East, is that short-term calculations and tactical reflexes will block longer term policy needs. That is exactly what others are trying to do. A curious dispute among French supporters of the Arab cause against Israel is an example of the political labyrinth ahead and the way it can be exploited.

The argument is whether Abu Nidal is dead or alive, and whether Lucien Bitterlin really talked to him in the

Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley on last Feb. 6 and 7.

Abu Nidal is the shadowy Palestinian terrorist who took credit for "dozens" of assassinations, according to Mr. Bitterlin's interview. He was reported dead last November. Mr. Bitterlin is a Frenchman, a Gaullist who became passionately pro-Arab in the course of supporting the late President Charles de Gaulle's decision to negotiate Algerian independence.

Mr. Bitterlin says he met a man who presented himself as Abu Nidal five years ago in Baghdad, where the terrorist was then known to have headquarters. Since, Abu Nidal shifted to Syrian patronage, and the recent interview was arranged last summer in Damascus but without any Syrian intervention, Mr. Bitterlin insists. He was sure the man he saw in the Bekaa was the same person because of an unusual scar on the face.

Abu Nidal was quoted denouncing the report of his death as a hoax by the P.L.O.'s Yasir Arafat in order to strengthen control over the divided P.L.O. Mr. Arafat, supported by other pro-Arab Frenchmen, denounced the interview as a "total fabrication" arranged by Syrian secret services to undermine him.

Western intelligence sources say there is no evidence that Abu Nidal has died. The man who gave the interview said his real name was Sabri Khalil el Banna, that he once received a scholarship from the U.N. Agency for Palestinian Refugees, and that he had once been arrested and expelled for revolutionary activity in Saudi Arabia.

He said that Jordan belongs to Palestine and Palestine belongs to Syria. He gave his aim as the total destruction of Israel and the establishment of a revolutionary "people's democracy" in a Syrian-ruled Palestine.

The real point, however, was threats to kill any P.L.O. official who deals with Israel, to kill King Hussein and other "reactionary" Arabs, and to attack Americans.

The purpose was clearly to prevent moves toward peace by heightening the physical fear of Arab leaders and their representatives. It may or may not have been inspired by Syria, but it serves Syrian policy. It may or may not have been Abu Nidal, but it has the political impact of terrorism.

For both Israel and the U.S., it is important to proceed deliberately, firmly and clearly in search of peace negotiations. That is the effective answer. Staying to fight in Lebanon is not only a murderous distraction, it helps inflate the terrorists. □